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LYING, DECEPTION, AND THE VIRTUE OF TRUTHFULNESS: A REPLY TO GARCIA

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In "Lies and the Vices of Deception," J. L. A. Garcia argues that lying is always immoral, since it always involves a motivation contrary to the proper discharge of a morally determinative role. I argue that Garcia fails to show (i) that anyone who fails in the sub-role of information-giver thereby fails in a morally determinative role, (ii) that the sub-role of information-giver is precisely that of "informing another truthfully," (iii) that lying deviates from the motivation characteristic of someone with the virtue of truthfulness, and (iv) that lies always undermine the well-being of the person to whom they are told.

In "Lies and the Vices of Deception,"[1] J. L. A. Garcia defends the sort of rigorist approach to lying that has lately fallen on hard times. After briefly expounding his version of virtue ethics, which serves as the theoretical underpinning for his arguments, he explains that lying is always contrary to virtue and therefore always immoral. Other forms of deception, he continues, are not contrary to virtue in the same way or to the same degree; although purposive deception is "presumptively vicious" (525), it need not be—as lying always is—impermissible.

Unlike most philosophers nowadays, I do not rule out in advance any view according to which lying is always impermissible (although I have not been persuaded by any such view that has been offered to date); and I actually agree that lying is at least sometimes more seriously contrary to virtue than are other forms of deception. But despite my readiness to see merit in Garcia's conclusions, I do not find his arguments persuasive. Much like Kant on the same subject, Garcia indulges in hyperbolic language that will move someone under its spell only so long as she can keep from asking herself what the naked facts look like without all the rhetorical clothing. I shall argue that there is nothing in Garcia's version of virtue theory that supports either claim: he does not show that lying is always impermissible, or even that it is more seriously contrary to virtue than any other form of deception.

For Garcia, a virtue is "a trait that counts towards someone's being good in one or another of certain personal role-relationships" (522). The traits in question will be dispositions to be motivated in certain ways. Goodness in a role-relationship is evaluated from the perspective of the patient rather than that of the agent: "whether [my motivational dispositions] fulfill those

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relationships is a matter of whether, in having them, I live up to what those in whose lives I occupy those roles need and benefit from in having them filled" (523). Thus, I have a virtue when I (i) occupy a certain sort of role with respect to another person and (ii) am disposed to be motivated in ways that (iii) make me good in that role, where (iv) what makes me "good-in-a-pertinent-role-to-you . . . is your need, your flourishing, your benefiting, your having a good life" (523). An action's being morally wrong or impermissible is then explained "in terms of its being distant from and opposed to virtue so to behave" (522).

I will not stop to ask whether this is the right conception of virtue. Instead, let us assume that it is correct and then ask whether Garcia is right to think that lying is always seriously contrary to virtue as thus understood. When one makes an assertion, one occupies "a special relation-within-a-relation with those addressed" (524). This relationship is too fleeting and engages too little of one's moral self to make it a role, as Garcia acknowledges; but it constitutes a sub-role, that of "information-giver." This sub-role "can occur within many role-relationships that collectively compose the moral life" (524), and so goodness in discharging the sub-role can count towards goodness in discharging the larger roles. Hence, there are standards of virtue that apply to the sub-role of information-giver.

Now at this point we might think that Garcia has shown only that standards of virtue will apply to our assertions whenever those assertions contribute to our discharge of a special relationship with someone—so that it might turn out to be vicious to lie to friends or family members but not to strangers. But one of the morally determinative role-relationships Garcia recognizes is the relationship we have to "what Christians call 'neighbor', which applies to anyone insofar as she is conceived as somehow a fellow traveler in life's journey" (522).[2] Thus (apparently) whenever we make an assertion to anyone at all, we occupy the sub-relationship of information-giver in a morally determinative relationship. Our being good in that sub-role will contribute to our being good in the larger role, and (more crucially) our deliberate subverting of that sub-role will constitute a subverting of the larger role. Knowingly to make a false assertion is to deviate in the greatest possible way "from the information-giver's (sub-role-)task of informing another truthfully. Other deceptions mis*lead* but only lies really mis*inform*" (525, emphasis in original). Lies, therefore, are always impermissible, because they always involve a full-blown deviation from goodness in some morally determinative role.

This conclusion comes too quickly, however; four steps in the argument need further elaboration and defense. First, since Garcia has conceded that information-giving is not a role in itself, but a sub-role of larger morally determinative roles, he must show that one who deviates from goodness in the sub-role of information-giver will necessarily deviate from goodness in the larger role. Otherwise it could turn out that someone might violate the sub-role without violating any morally determinative role. Second, since he has said that virtue and vice involve the manner in which we carry out roles, he must show that he has properly characterized the (sub-) role of information-giver as that of "informing another truthfully." If the role is more properly characterized in some other way, it could turn out that one could some-

times misinform another person and nonetheless not deviate from virtue. It could also turn out, contrary to what Garcia hopes to show, that misinforming someone will be no more vicious than misleading her. Third, since he has associated virtue so closely with motivation, he cannot show that lying is vicious without showing that it deviates from the motivation characteristic of someone who has the virtue of truthfulness. So we need an account of the motivation that operates in the truthful person before we can assess the turpitude of someone who lies, or even see whether all lies deviate from that motivation. Fourth, since goodness in a moral role is supposed to be measured by the need, benefit, or flourishing of the patient, Garcia must show that lies always undermine the well-being of the person to whom the lie is told. It seems to me that Garcia fails to provide persuasive arguments on any of these points. I shall take each point in turn.

For the first point I shall assume that anyone who lies is violating the sub-role of information-giver (an assumption I call into question below in discussing the second point) and ask whether Garcia gives us any reason to believe that such a violation will necessarily constitute a violation of some larger morally determinative role. I cannot see where he does this. It is not even plausible to think this is the case within friendship. If my best friend asks me whether he did well at his last APA presentation, and I reassure him that he did quite well even though in fact I think he was made to look rather foolish, I have not behaved badly to him as a friend—or at least it is not *obvious* that I have, and Garcia gives me no reason to think I have.

'Friendship', in fact, is not a univocal term; it names a variety of relationships with differing expectations, degrees of intimacy, and purposes. For that reason I suspect it would be a hopeless task to derive so specific an injunction as the requirement never to lie from any considerations about "*the* role" of friendship. Now if (as in my example above) I were to lie to my best friend, I *would* be failing him as a friend; but that is because of the particular nature of our friendship, where it is understood that we will be honest even under such circumstances. We have an implicit agreement to be truthful with each other. But Garcia cannot avail himself of this move, since he does not wish to ground the immorality of lying in any implicit promises to be truthful; and it seems clear that there are some friendships worthy of the name in which no such agreement exists. In fact, it seems plausible to think that in certain sorts of friendship, and under certain circumstances, one would be *required* to lie in order to be good as (that sort of) friend. Suppose that what my friend wants, needs, and expects from me when asking a certain question is reassurance; suppose also that I cannot be both reassuring and truthful. Under such circumstances I would surely be acting badly as a friend if I told the discouraging truth instead of offering a reassuring lie. So goodness as a friend seems not only to be consistent with lying, but even sometimes to require lying.

When it comes to the generalized role of 'neighbor', it becomes even less plausible to suppose that a violation of the role of information-giver necessarily constitutes a violation of the larger role. For one thing, I do not see how we can specify what it is to be good in so vague and diffuse a role without having specified in advance what good character is in general. What could it mean for me to be a good 'neighbor' (in the Christian sense

of that word) other than to be a good person in my dealings with whomever I happen to encounter? So the notion of good person must be prior to the notion of good neighbor.

Leaving that worry aside, though, and assuming that we can somehow identify independently what constitutes goodness in the role of neighbor, we must still be shown that lying automatically deviates from goodness in that role. The closest we find to such an argument is Garcia's contention that lying constitutes treachery:

> In asserting *p* to you, I present myself as someone for you to trust (on *p* itself, at least). It is this personal connection, this 'sub-role', that I establish and offer you in making the assertion, and that I also betray in an especially egregious way when I act with intentions diametrically opposed to what I should intend when so connected to you: specifically, the intent that you possess the truth on *p*, which intention would count towards my fulfilling my part of the connection that I offer. That is to say, I betray you in this when I lie. (528)

But essential to the concept of betrayal is that I have a special relationship with the person I have betrayed. I can harm or degrade or insult a complete stranger, but I cannot betray her. If I harbor a fugitive and then decide to tell the police his whereabouts, I have betrayed him; but if I merely see a fugitive running past and then inform his pursuers which direction he took, I cannot be said to have betrayed him, though I may have harmed him in some other way and perhaps even done him an injustice. So whatever might be happening when I lie to Kant's celebrated murderer when he comes to my door, it certainly is not betrayal.

Garcia wants to insist, of course, that there always is such a special relationship when I make an assertion, even to Kant's murderer: "the agent lures the aggressor with assurances that she can depend on the agent in this respect, all the while planning the double-cross on that very matter. . . . [T]he liar acts with ill will inasmuch as she means to seduce her audience into a relationship of trust and dependence for purposes of betraying it" (529-530). Now we can agree that someone who behaves in the way Garcia describes is treacherous and vicious, but as a description of my lying to the murderer this is purely fanciful. I have not lured or seduced anyone into anything. And I see no reason to suppose that being a good neighbor to someone requires me never to encourage her in a false belief. As Garcia acknowledges, virtue is compatible with the use of force; it would follow that I can be a good neighbor to someone against whom I am using force, even (under the right circumstances) to someone whom I am killing.[3] Is lying so much more serious than force that it is never compatible with goodness as a neighbor? As Duns Scotus observed, "It is less bad to take away true opinion from one's neighbor, or to be the occasion of generating false opinion in him, than to take away his bodily life. Indeed, there is scarcely a comparison."[4]

Garcia's arguments in fact suggest that he does not take seriously enough his own identification of information-providing as a *sub*-role. He makes no real effort to show how badness as an information-provider nec-

essarily involves badness in a larger role. He seems to think, in other words, that information-providing is itself a morally determinative role. Thus we come to my second point. Supposing that information-providing really is a morally determinative role, has Garcia characterized that role properly? According to him, what is central to performing well as an information-giver is to be committed to the information-recipient's having the truth about the very proposition one asserts. Therefore, if I mislead without actually lying, I have not deviated so badly from my role as information-provider that I am thereby guilty of doing something morally wrong (though there is a defeasible presumption that I have done so).

I find this restriction purely stipulative. It is wholly arbitrary to *define* information-giving so that it just *means* asserting propositions one believes to be true. As part of an argument, the definition is probably also question-begging. Garcia argues that lying is always wrong because it seriously undermines one's role as information-provider, but the role of information-provider turns out to consist, by definition, precisely in not lying. Furthermore, a reasonable, non-stipulative understanding of the role of information-provider will not support the distinction Garcia wishes to draw between lies, which are always immoral, and deception, which is only presumptively immoral. Suppose (to adapt one of his examples) that a colleague who missed the department colloquium asks me how the speaker's talk went. Now it was a perfectly brilliant piece of philosophy, but I am filled with ill-will towards the speaker, so with raised eyebrows and a devious smirk I tell my colleague, "Well, there was certainly nothing wrong with her *grammar*." Apart from the desire to save the traditional distinction between lying and other forms of deception, is there any reason at all to think I have done better as information-provider than I would have if I simply said, "It was awful"?

Consideration of my third point might help Garcia's case here. Virtue, according to Garcia, is supposed to be bound up with our motivations. The person with the virtue of truthfulness, in other words, is one who is characteristically motivated in a certain way. If it can be shown that lying is more seriously contrary to that motivation than any other form of deception, the traditional distinction can perhaps be saved. Unfortunately we run into a problem similar to the one I have complained about with respect to Garcia's description of the information-provider's role. He identifies the characteristic motivation of the truthful person as follows: "it is *S*'s commitment to *A*'s having the truth about what she asserts—*p* itself—that is central to *S*'s being good in her sub-role of *A*'s information-provider" (526-527). But we need further argument to show that the characteristic motivation of the honest person is a commitment to other people's having the truth about exactly those propositions that she asserts to be true—in other words, a commitment not to lie. I would argue that so stingy a commitment to truth is not enough to justify characterizing someone as honest. For a commitment not to lie is compatible with all sorts of low cunning, dissimulation, hypocrisy, conniving, suppression of truth, and the like. To describe as honest someone who is habitually motivated to act in any of those ways seems clearly mistaken. Recall the example of my crafty answer to my colleague's question. Isn't my answer, technically truthful

though it is, every bit as contrary to the usual motivation of the honest person as an outright lie would have been?

Of course, even if we answer yes to that last question, I have done no more than undermine the distinction between lies and other forms of deception; it could still be true—as far as the present argument goes—that all lies are immoral.[5] (Then all deception would turn out to be immoral as well.) As long as the honest person is characteristically motivated never to lie (even if, as I have suggested, her motivation *qua* honest person is not *exhausted* by her commitment not to lie), all lies would turn out to be immoral. But is that indeed part of the characteristic motivation of the honest person? On an Aristotelian conception of honesty, the honest person will be one who deals truthfully with others insofar as truthful dealing with others conduces to or in part constitutes her good *qua* human. An Aristotelian who wanted to maintain a rigorist position on lying would therefore be obligated to show that no person of practical wisdom could ever see a lie as anything other than a deviation from her proper good. Such a view has little intuitive plausibility, and I cannot imagine how one would go about constructing an argument for it.

Now Garcia is not an Aristotelian on this issue, so the argument he must make is somewhat different. For him—and here we come to our fourth and final point—the goodness of virtuous motivation is not to be found in the well-being or flourishing of the virtuous agent but in that of the patient. If he is to answer the challenge I have posed, therefore, he must show that lies always harm the person to whom they are told. I find three arguments for this claim. First, the very inordinateness of a lie "*consists in* and *constitutes* an injury to the neighbor, even if it *causes* her no *further* harm" (528, emphasis in original). What is that inordinateness? It "consists in the contrariety of the action's motivational input to the sort of motivation someone in the neighbor's position needs for the information-giver to live up to the spirit of her role" (528). We have already seen that this answer will not do. The role of information-giver is not itself morally determinative, and badness in that role does not entail badness in any role that *is* morally determinative. Moreover, it has not been established that the motivational input involved in lying is necessarily contrary to the characteristic motivation of the honest person. Finally, the argument is viciously circular. It is intended as proof that lies injure the person lied to because they diminish her well-being. But this injury is said to consist in the fact that the liar's motivation is contrary to what the person lied to needs, i.e., to some constituent of her well-being. Now the element of well-being at issue here cannot be anything other than the state of not having been lied to. So the argument amounts to this: lying to someone harms her because it makes it the case that someone has lied to her.[6]

The second argument for the claim that lies always harm the person lied to is that lies always involve betrayal. I have already cast doubt on the notion that lying essentially involves betrayal, so there is no need to deal further with that contention. The third argument is that lying always degrades the person to whom the lie is told. Garcia argues that "[t]o degrade or manipulate is to treat with contempt, and contempt is an indignity and therefore a violation of the dignity and respect that ground

human rights" (529). But Garcia acknowledges that it can sometimes be licit to kill a would-be attacker. Now we can either say (implausibly) that in killing the attacker we do not treat him with contempt, degrade him, or manipulate him; or we can say (more plausibly) that we do indeed treat him with contempt (and so forth), but justifiably so. If we take the first option in describing cases of force, it would seem also to be available for describing cases of deception: we could say with equal plausibility that in lying to Kant's murderer we are not treating him with contempt. Similarly, if we take the second option in describing cases of force, we can take it in describing cases of deception: we could admit that we are treating the would-be murderer with contempt, but insist that we are justified in doing so. After all (to return to Scotus's point) if the right not to be deprived of life is defeasible, the right not to be lied to is surely defeasible.

For all these reasons I remain unpersuaded that Garcia's virtue theory implies an absolute prohibition of lying. It seems quite possible for someone to lie without contravening the motivation that typically operates in someone with the virtue of honesty, without doing unjustified harm to the person to whom the lie is told, and without acting badly in any morally determinative role.[7]

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NOTES

1. *Faith and Philosophy* 15 (1998): 514-537.
2. One might well wonder at this point whether the notion of a role-relationship has been so emptied of specificity that we are now working with a Kantian wolf in an Aristotelian sheep costume, but I will not pursue that worry here.
3. As an alternative, one might say that neighborliness does exclude the use of force, but there are some people with respect to whom neighborliness is not morally required. This alternative would obviously not help Garcia's case, since even if neighborliness excludes lying, lies to those who fall outside the required scope of neighborliness might be licit.
4. *Ordinatio* 3, d. 38, q. un., n. 5. Minus enim malum est auferre proximo opinionem veram, vel occasionaliter generare in eo opinionem falsam, quam auferre sibi vitam corporalem; imo non est quasi comparatio.
5. I do, however, take my argument under the first point to have established that Garcia has given us no good reason to think all lies are immoral.
6. Could Garcia save his argument by identifying the element of well-being as the possession of true belief? No, because deception of any form would undermine that.
7. I am grateful to John Corvino, Richard Fumerton, and Diane Jeske for their helpful comments.